

Sale day activity at the holding pens...



Females, part of the replacement heifers...



Quality Commercial Angus: Rice Ranches

by Ann Gooding

“We had quite a few buyers returning year after year, and they all wanted first choice. It got to be a problem. The only solution was to hold a production sale.” So the first sale was held in November 1977. It was a barn-burner. In one hour and 40 minutes, 671 cattle went through the ring, commanding top prices.

Rices Ranches, Inc., Harrison, Mont., were on the map. What private treaty buyers had known for years had the attention of the entire beef cattle industry. The Rices raise *quality* commercial cattle.

Rice Ranches, covering more than 27,000 acres laying against the mountains in southwestern Montana, run a breeding herd of 1,050 and winter 2,400 head. The family operation involves Bob and Bonnie Rice, their sons Greg and Barry. Greg and his wife Karen have two children, Collin and Kristi; Barry and Beck also have two, Sam and Danny.

Bob Rice has gained more than a little notoriety through the years by paying top prices for the bulls he uses on his commercial Angus cows. He admittedly tries to top the best registered sales in a state where there are a lot of good sales—and in most cases he succeeds. “We try to buy the best bulls from the best herds in Montana. We try to buy the highest gaining, the biggest bulls. But,” Bob adds, “they have to look good, too. Production testing isn’t the whole answer. Size for age means a lot to us, but we want bulls with meat and muscle in the right places, bulls with length and bulls that look like bulls.”

Rice Ranches have not always been so

large or the cattle so well-known. In fact, 30 years ago the Rices were just getting started.

The ranch itself dates back to homestead days in the 1800s. The present owners came on the scene in the mid-1940s. Bob and Bonnie both had grown up in the area, Bonnie at Harrison and Bob a few miles south on Cherry Creek near Norris. In 1945 Bonnie’s father, Peter MacMillan, became a partner in what is now the home ranch; a short time later he became sole owner. Bob, Bonnie and Woody MacMillan (Bonnie’s brother, who remained a partner until 1956) came along in 1948 and leased the land, then bought it in 1950. What was to become one of the larger family-owned ranches in an area full of large ranches was then 2,160 acres stocked with 15 cows of mixed heritage.

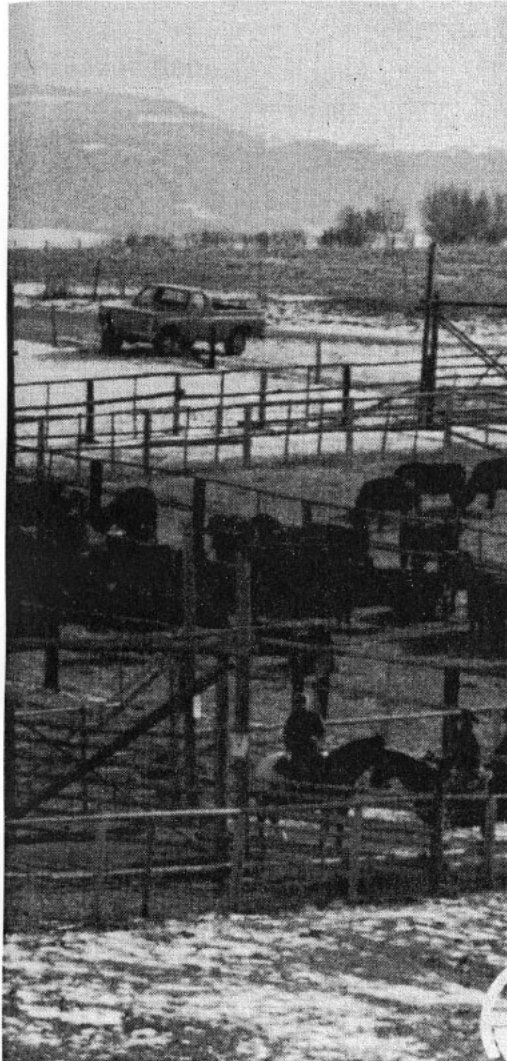
The Rices and MacMillan bought their first black bull in 1947 and a couple years later bought 50 black cows through a southern Montana auction yard.

The 30 years since have not been idle. In that time about 25,000 additional acres were acquired, the breeding herd grew by 1,000 head, two boys were born and raised.

How it Works

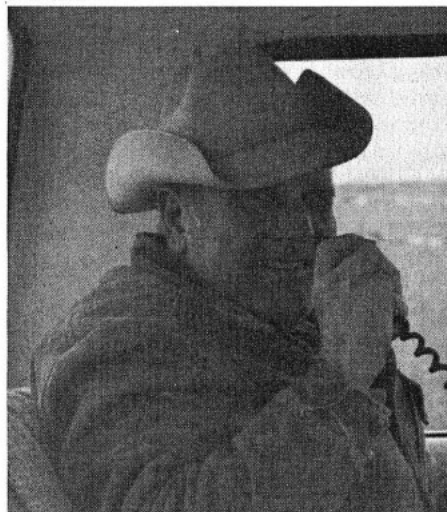
Irrigated hay land raises all of the feed. The Rices both bale and stack alfalfa and wild hay to the tune of 6,500 tons a year. They also raise some grain—1,400 acres of wheat and 200 of barley. Some of the pastures have been planted, and there’s some crested wheatgrass, but most of the land produces strong native grass.

The cattle summer on leased mountain



Photos by Jack Wilson

Bob Rice



Bonnie Rice



pastures in three different areas made up of forest, state, BLM and private ground, most of which is well fenced.

Instead of trucking them, the Rices drive their cattle to summer pastures. It is not unusual to see black cattle strung out along a back road or across a pasture for 3 or 4 miles, trailing to higher summer pastures in the spring, then to lower winter ground in the fall.

The drives, plus other ranch work, keep about 40 horses on the place, most of them home-raised and trained.

Other than an occasional bull kept with a small group of cows, the Rices rotate bulls every five or six days during their 2-month breeding season, figuring 25 cows to a bull. They also do some A.I. breeding. Emulous, Rito and Juanada Lad blood flows through many of the cattle.

Barry has done some heat synchronization with heifers, and those heifers have earned attraction status in the production sales. In the 1978 sale 26 of them averaged \$979; 15 were bred to CSU Rito 4114, 11 to a Dale Davis bull. In 1979 28 synchronized heifers bred to Vermilion Beaufort 7103 averaged \$1,013. (Windy Water Ranches, repeat buyer from neighboring Ennis, took 17 of them at \$1,050 a round.)

Calving Season

Heifers are bred to calve in mid-February; the cows calve in February and March. The Rices pregnancy test only heifers and 3-year-olds.

When calving starts, they bring 700-800 head into an area with brush and some sheds. Then as they calve, the cows are moved out to the hills in bunches of about 100 head. This, says Bob, helps cut down on scour problems. And he likes to keep the cattle in smaller bunches because he feels they do a little better. Weather is a factor, but the Rices generally have a 94-96% calf crop.

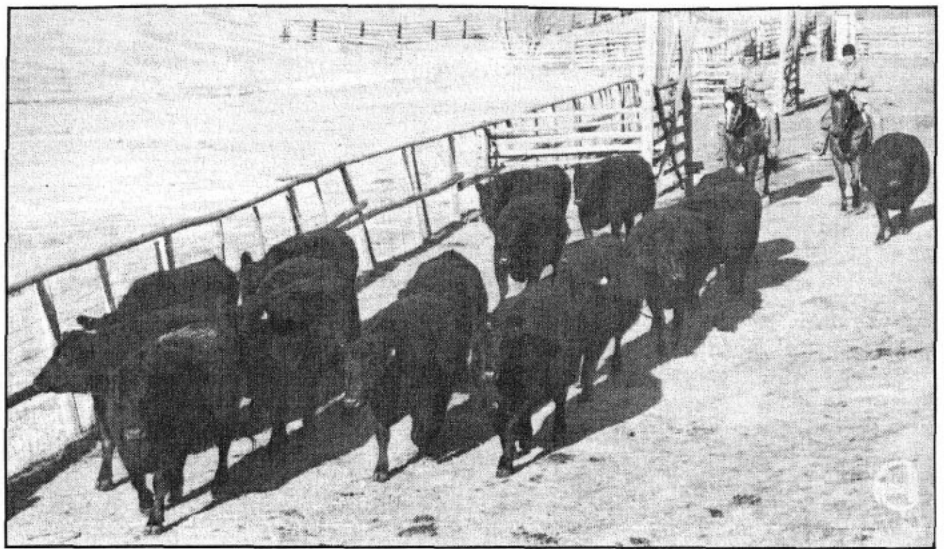
The calves after they are weaned go back to the hills until winter closes in. Then through the bad months they're fed hay with a phosphorus or bone meal supplement.

Since they keep calves to sell as long yearlings, the Rices winter around 2,400 head. Most years that means feeding from about the first of the year until mid-May. Last year, however, feeding extended from Nov. 9 to May 25.

The Rice cattle are not coddled but have been selected to grow and do well on good strong grass. A random sampling of 1979 steer calves showed a 558-lb. average last fall. And the yearlings weighed in October averaged 947 lb., up 222 lb. from a 725-lb. average a few years back. Bob credits some of the increased weight to a shorter calving period but adds that genetics are responsible for about 80% of it. Carefully selected cows and top bulls are putting pounds on the calves.

The Cows

To build up the herd originally, Bob kept home-grown heifers. Now, with the



Females headed for the sale ring...

breeding herd established, he keeps back about 130 replacements each year, selecting them, like the bulls, on quality and size. According to Bob, "A long, good-looking, feminine cow falls in with good mothering and milking ability and fertility. She'll raise a good calf. The importance of these traits is the reason we don't go altogether with indexing.

"In the cow herd we use our own type of indexing, our own production testing program. It relies on the type of calf, considering not only weight but where that weight is on the calf. A yearling has got to have meat where we want it or we might just as well quit raising cattle."

Bob believes that, by using only weight indexing, a breeder can end up with some awful looking calves. That's why he depends to a certain extent on eyeballing.

Cows with lighter calves get the gate, though, when Bob and his sons cull in the fall. They cut heavily into the twos and threes, then leave the cows pretty much alone until they are about eight.


At one time the Rices also raised sheep, 500-700 ewes. But they gave that up a few years back because, says Bonnie, "Coyotes put us out of business." Coyotes have killed only four calves in the last 10 years, and Bob believes that's due to two things: First, Angus cows take good care of their calves and, second, cattle are kept fairly close in at calving time.

Other Activities

The Rices work for the cattle industry off the ranch as well as on—and they find time to do a few other things, too. They belong to the Montana Angus Assn. Bob is on the Executive Board of the Montana Stockgrowers Assn. and sits on the National Cattlemen's Assn. Taxation Committee. He's a director of the Federal Land Bank. He served on the local school board for 12 years. Son Greg is president of the Southwestern Montana Stockgrowers Assn. (a job his dad also held). Daughter-in-law Karen leads up the Beferendum Task

Force for the area cowbelles, a responsibility Bonnie had in 1977. Bonnie is the first and so far only woman to serve on the Board of Directors of the First National Bank, Bozeman.

The Rices are busy, active, hard-working. And that first sale not only brought them industry-wide attention, it rewarded them for their efforts. A year later their sale echoed the first, only with higher averages. New people had joined repeat buyers on the seats to bid on the Rice cattle.

Last November's sale did it again, when 431 commercial Angus sold to average \$1,000. In that sale, as in the second, many animals went to breeders who already owned cattle carrying the Rice brand. The sales are fast-paced; it's not unusual for 60 head to sell at one drop of the gavel. And when that gavel dropped on the last pen of heifers in last fall's sale, the Rices once again had the industry's attention. Because they raise quality commercial cattle. 

Moving up the sale bulls...

